Defeating the Threat in Iraq Through the Combined Arms Convoy Concept (CAC2)

by Captain Klaudius K. Robinson

Coalition forces face an unconventional, asymmetrical, and adaptive threat in Iraq. Noncompliant forces (NCFs), Former Regime Loyalist (FRLs), and foreign fighters all contribute to a threat most mounted Army units have not seen or dealt with recently. U.S. forces are continually developing tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) to defeat NCFs, FRLs, and foreign fighters (these factions will be referred to as the enemy), but in turn, these factions adapt and the struggle becomes an action-reaction-counteraction cycle.

The current threat in Iraq is very closely associated with guerrilla-type forces. The threat is very similar to the threat faced by rotational units at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC), Fort Polk, Louisiana. The only difference is that the enemy in Iraq is not uniformed, and therefore difficult to identify. The enemy is not willing to take heavy losses and is aware of the overall supremacy of the coalition forces if engaged conventionally. Force-on-force maneuver warfare is not advantageous to the enemy when he is outmanned and outgunned. Therefore, other tactics are used to engage coalition forces.

Initially, the enemy used simple ambushes involving rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) attacks and small arms fire (AK-47s and light machine guns). The attacks were carried out by a small force, which usually broke contact after the initial volley of fire to increase survivability. Ambushes were set either on one side of the road, or both when the road was elevated, allowing the enemy to engage coalition forces without firing into each other. The confusion of the initial volley, coupled with the small size of the enemy force breaking contact, made it extremely difficult to acquire, engage, and destroy targets. Most ambushes involved friendly mounted units that were engaged from the flanks when traveling at high speed. Mounted units had trouble acquiring and engaging the enemy during the ambushes. These factors led to very few confirmed kills resulting from friendly returned fire. In turn, the small size of the enemy forces and limited scope of weaponry used, very rarely, caused casualties or damage to equipment. Enemy forces targeted mostly soft-skinned vehicles traveling in convoys or on patrols, such as high-mobility, multipurpose wheeled vehicles (HMMWVs), light medium tactical vehicles (LMTVs), and heavy expanded mobility tactical trucks (HEMTTs).

Initially, light and heavy armored vehicles, such as M113s and M1s were very rarely targeted. As the threat progressed, there was an increase in targeting soft-skinned vehicles, but attacks on M1 tanks were extremely rare. The threat was countered by increasing the minimum number of vehicles and personnel in convoys and patrols. The enemy responded by employing improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in ambushes in conjunction with RPG and small arms fire. The attacks then shifted to using IEDs almost exclusively. Using IEDs allowed the enemy to conduct ambushes without self-exposure to coalition fire or action. This type of threat is not going to cause mass casualties. It will, however, disrupt operations and force commanders to re-evaluate how they conduct combat and support operations. Commanders are forced to develop new TTPs and shed training principles that they have come to rely on.

Logistics and administrative convoys are easy enemy targets. It is easy to see why, soft-skinned vehicles offer less protection, are easier to destroy, and are perceived as a lesser threat by enemy forces. The battalion scout platoon and any other wheeled vehicles with crew-served weapons are heavily used for providing escorts to administrative convoys, but logistics convoys are expected to provide their own security. Combat power, such as tank companies and mortar platoons, was used for force protection at forward operating bases (FOBs), as quick reaction forces (QRFs), and reserved for major offensive operations such as battalion- or brigade-level raids. This leads to very little combat power being applied to defeat the main threat — ambushes.

Mounted forces are not trained to deal with this type of threat. During each rotation to the JRTC, a light infantry brigade is usually augmented by one armored company team. There are normally 10 rotations in a year, and there are a lot more than 10 armored company teams in the Army. As a result, mounted units have had almost no opportunity to train against this type of threat during a combat training center (CTC) rotation at the platoon/company level, much less at the battalion/brigade level. Despite the limited training opportunities, we have an increase in this type of threat used in recent years. The Russians have seen it in Chechnya and Afghanistan and U.S. forces have seen it in Somalia, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Light infantry forces are pitted against this threat at the JRTC, and as a result, have had success, especially in Afghanistan.

The National Training Center (NTC) does a wonderful job preparing our mounted force for full scale maneuver warfare, but does very little to prepare our mounted forces for the current threat faced in Iraq. The problem lies in the fact that most armored units go to the NTC and, as mentioned before, very few have an opportunity to go to the JRTC. This trend will probably not change in the near future, so how do armored/mounted units train to defeat the type of threat faced in Iraq? More importantly, how do they defeat this threat?

We do a good job training our armored units to fight an outdated enemy. Training is not the problem, focusing this training to defeat the correct threat is. There are several steps that can be taken to prepare a mounted force to face the current threat in Iraq. For example, today's tank gunnery focuses on vehicle-on-vehicle engagements with enemy targets always in the front arc of the tank. There are no targets directly to the flanks or even to the rear of the tank, as encountered in ambushes. Instead, engagements should be modified to allow the tank to travel in a direction, and acquire and engage targets to the flanks and rear. For example, the tank travels parallel to the range and has to acquire targets to its flank. Targets should reflect the most likely threat; in this case, it is dismounts.

Mounted units must also train on how to properly encounter the enemy. Not all of Iraq is a desert as seen during the first Gulf War. The Fertile Crescent in Iraq (Tigris and Euphrates River Valleys and tributaries) offers terrain reminiscent of a jungle. Thick vegetation, man-made structures, walls, canals, and dikes severely limit mounted movement along the flanks of the walls. Vehicles are forced to stay on roads and this limits the maneuver space of tank commanders, platoon leaders, and company commanders. As a result, units must focus training on conducting patrols and convoys along roads that are open on the flanks, as well as severely limited by terrain. When ambushed, convoys and patrols must quickly identify which side of the road the ambush originated and mass return fires in that direction. Training must be focused to make this a simple battle drill understood and executed by all crews in the convoy or patrol. Patrols tend to maintain unit integrity but convoys sometimes do not. This is where consistency in training must be reflected across the entire unit so that everyone in the convoy knows what to do when an

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ambush occurs. Battle drills, whether standard or developed as a result of the threat, must be well rehearsed and executed.

Convoy and patrol leaders must know how to use combat multipliers. Essentially, when facing the Iraqi threat, even a convoy is a military combat operation. As a result, it should be treated like one. Troop leading procedures (TLPs) need to be exercised and leaders need to brief operation orders (OPORDs). When planning the convoy or patrol, a leader must plan for contingencies and integrate other branches into his plan. The contingencies should include procedures to follow if ambushed with IEDs or small arms, or if IEDs are found along the road.

Leaders should develop a direct fire plan, plan indirect fires, and rehearse the plan. As stated in *Guide to Military Operations Other Than War,* "Because they often consist of so many disparate elements — many of which may not even be military, or whose members may not speak a common language — convoys must be meticulously planned and prepared. Once the convoy crosses its start point, especially in austere environments, it is very difficult to adjust for shortcomings in preparation or planning."[1]

Our leaders and soldiers do a great job of adjusting to a fluid environment, but adjustments can be mitigated with proper planning and preparation. Units can train for this as a platoon or company collective task. Combat multipliers include using indirect fires and air assets. Leaders must be trained on how to properly plan for and employ these assets. "The fire support element of the headquarters initiating the convoy should develop a fire plan to support the convoy. Normally, this is a simple plan consisting of priority targets on which the supporting artillery or mortars are laid and shifted as the convoy progresses along its route. This keeps the artillery focused on the general area of the convoy and greatly improves its responsiveness."[2] This training must be accomplished through crawl, walk, and run phases. There must also be leader emphasis on conducting this training and not getting wrapped around training the way we have always trained. New threats require new TTPs, but this requires units to train personnel to execute them properly, quickly, and effectively. Training, however, is only part of the problem. Units must defeat the enemy.

To win on a battlefield, a force must defeat another force. This is a simple and plain statement, yet there are many methods and means to an end. Defeat is defined as, "A tactical task to either disrupt or nullify the enemy force commander's plan and subdue his will to fight so that he is unwilling or unable to further pursue his adopted course of action and yields to the will of his opponent."[3]

On the simplest of levels, to defeat your enemy is to negate his ability to fight. The best way to negate an enemy's ability to fight is to destroy him. To destroy him, you must acquire him. To acquire him, you must go where he is. Currently, the main threat comes from ambushes against convoys and patrols. As a result, this is where combat power needs to be focused and focused toward defeating the individuals who are engaging friendly forces. As a result, combat power must not be tasked out and must be concentrated to accomplish this task.

There are several things that dilute combat power in a unit. Multiple FOBs cause units to commit combat power to secure each FOB and provide QRFs. This also puts more convoys on the road because of an increased logistics need. FOBs not tactically or centrally located in an assigned area of responsibility (AOR) will cause vehicles to travel longer distances to cover the AOR. Longer distance travel equals more maintenance problems, which leads to more deadlined combat power. There are several ways to concentrate combat power, such as limiting the number of FOBs, establishing FOB locations with mission travel distances under consideration, and combining convoys and patrols into one package.

Combining convoys and patrols into one package will focus combat power on the threat. The enemy will be a lot more hesitant in attacking a soft-skinned target that is escorted by a tank. Combining convoys and patrols will also decrease the number of targets available to the enemy. This becomes a combined-arms convoy and leads us to the combined-arms convoy concept (CAC2). The CAC2 uses all the concepts described in this article. Convoys and patrols are combined to take the fight to the enemy and designed and trained to defeat the enemy. The convoy becomes essentially an offensive operation while accomplishing its assigned mission, whether it is logistics or administrative. Therefore, it is treated like an offensive mission.

Leaders must conduct TLPs and resources must be committed for the operation. This includes indirect fire and air assets. This combined-arms package is robust and can respond to a roadside threat, especially an ambush when reaction time is critical. The faster an element can return fire and the more volume of fire that element can produce, the better. For example, a morning logistics package (LOGPAC) is assigned a tank platoon with which to travel. Two OH-58 Kiowa Warriors are also assigned to this package and indirect fires are planned in free fire areas (FFAs) along the planned route. One leader is assigned as the convoy commander and is responsible for conducting TLPs. The leader should be well versed in how to employ all assets available and should have the aid of the battalion or brigade staff in completing his plan. The convoy executes the mission and is ambushed, but because of proper training, the enemy's fire point of origination is identified and the convoy package masses its fires on the enemy. The air assets are critical in this concept because they offer a different vantage point in acquiring the enemy. "Certain air assets can also be extremely helpful. Attack helicopter escort is ideal, as it can simultaneously reconnoiter and provide armed escort."[4] If the convoy is attacked with IEDs, the attack aviation element is there to potentially identify and destroy the individ-

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ual responsible for initiating the IED. Ground forces can also engage the enemy and fire support assets are possibly used to destroy the enemy. The ground commander has several options to use or combine in an effort to destroy the enemy. More importantly, the convoy/patrol package acts as a deterrent, preventing enemy attacks.

The main task facing our armored force is defeating the enemy. As mentioned before, the best way to accomplish this is to destroy the enemy. The current threat in Iraq is an elusive one and differentiating enemy from innocent bystander is difficult. Therefore, it is not always possible to acquire and destroy the enemy, especially individual attackers. The next best method to defeating the enemy's intent is by deterrence. By projecting overwhelming combat power through several means, the enemy has difficulty achieving success. The CAC2 concept is one of these methods.

Observation and interdiction through indirect fires is another method. Observation can be achieved through ground elements positioned in observation posts, observing routes traveled by friendly forces. In essence, securing the lines of communication is deemed a priority. Aerial route reconnaissance is another effective course of action. Indirect fires can be used to interdict the enemy by executing fire missions at areas from which friendly forces have been attacked. Indirect fire missions are limited by possible collateral damage caused by proximity to innocent civilians and their structures. They can be used effectively if attacks have occurred away from civilian structures. Commanders must vary the execution of these methods of deterrence to prevent lapsing into a set pattern. Keeping the enemy on his toes deters and interdicts his ability to effectively execute the chosen course of action.

The threat faced in Iraq is different than anything the current armored force has trained for recently. It is true that tanks and armored vehicles are not designed to fight single individuals in urban or jungle terrain. Light infantry is better suited for this type of fight; however, an armored force can be successful in this type of environment. The enemy will very rarely decide to attack our heavily armored vehicles; instead they focus on the armored force's Achilles' heel — its support assets. As a result, new TTPs must be exercised to combat the threat against soft-skinned vehicles. CAC2 is one form of these TTPs. If used, armored forces can take the fight to the enemy and prevent the only form of attack used by the enemy that has any chance of success. Armored leaders must eschew the training mindset and the Soviet doctrine to which they have grown accustomed and develop new TTPs to fight unconventional, asymmetrical, and adaptive threats.

Notes

[1]LTC Keith E. Bonn and MSG Anthony E. Baker, *Guide to Military Operations Other Than War*, Stackpole Books, Mechanicsburg, PA, 2000, p. 203.

[2]Ibid., p. 204.

[3]U.S. Army Field Manual 101-5-1, *Operational Terms and Graphics*, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 30 September 1997.

[4]Bonn and Baker, *Guide to Military Operations Other Than War,* p. 204.

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